

THE STING

Directed by George Roy Hill
Produced by Tony Bill and Julia Phillips & Michael Phillips
Distributed by Universal Pictures
Released in 1973

Revenge films are a perennial favorite at the box-office. We all love the idea of striking back at those who have wounded us. Even better, when the avenger acts on another's behalf, a desire for justice (not mere revenge) fires his trap-setting machinations. In its own friendly, lackadaisical way, *The Sting* stacks the deck (pun intended). Old-time grifter Luther Coleman is murdered by thugs dispatched by crime lord Doyle Lonnegan. Two easy winners played by Paul Newman and Robert Redford set out to make him pay.

But is Luther's widow going to see any part of the mind-boggling \$500,000 which results? We never find out. Luther is kind of forgotten once we get to the last hour of the picture. His widow is mentioned as a means of (supposedly) encouraging Hooker to betray Gondorff (the FBI will go after her if he won't play ball—but it's all a gag to convince crooked cop Snyder that Hooker is hooked.) Everything (with the brief exception of Salino's demise) gets lighter, breezier, even as the tension begins to mount. It's really an impressive machine of a movie, but it amounts to nothing more than an updated version of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (George Roy Hill directed that, too) shorn of the existential brooding, resplendent locations, and humor. At least in that film the dynamic anti-heroes were punished for their crimes. In *The Sting*, we're expected to forget that Luther and Hooker and Erie Kid were going to rip off anybody; they just got lucky (temporarily, that is) and chanced upon a creep numbers-runner. In the law of the underground, why *shouldn't* Luther and Hooker be killed? Those are the rules. These guys choose to corrupt society (and, no, shoving one dirty cop in our face does not mean everything and everyone is rotten, so it's okay to cheat and steal), but instead act like they should be rewarded for their cleverness.

That's the *moral* false premise of the film. The *logical* false premise is harder to encapsulate. Why can't Lonnegan determine that the guy he's trying to kill for ripping him off is the same guy he's working with to nail Gondorff? His hitmen—including the "best," Salino, know exactly what he looks like. Does no one ever show Lonnegan a picture of him, or say to Lonnegan, That guy you're hanging out with all the time is the one who ripped you off? (If he made the connection, and *The Sting* never stung, this could have been a real hum-dinger of a movie, a witty, wistful drama as opposed to a loopy lark.)

Also, Gondorff is supposed to be a big operator, but he just set up the betting parlor that week. For years, the closest he's been to horses is a merry-go-round. Lonnegan's got twenty people in his Chicago organization who could tell him the whole thing is a false-front.

And, worst of all, suppliers are recruited to build the off-track betting parlor. The contractor refuses a percentage when he finds out that these crazies are attempting to rip off Lonnegan. No one in Chicago is going to gossip about this? The rumors will never reach Lonnegan and force him to conclude he cannot dare risk his money?

Really?

There are some wonderful moments in this movie, and Lonnegan is delightfully despicable. But apart from the rigged poker game on the train, Paul Newman has *nothing* to do. He's not the one getting chased around the city. We see him do very little organizing. All of that happens off-screen. He shows up now and then to chew out/worry over Hooker.

Indeed, Redford is the star here, but his street-smart character is pretty stupid. He blows \$3,000 (of stolen money!) publicly; sleeps with an assassin when he should be laying low getting some shut-eye; and stubbornly refuses to tell Gondorff about the mess he's made, dodging crooked cops and killers (thereby putting the whole operation at risk).

Admittedly, the glistening star appeal and nostalgic aura of *The Sting* almost carries it to the winner's circle. It's got a great sense of style, adroitly using intertitles, matte paintings, and Marvin Hamlisch's much-heralded Scott Joplin score to orient the audience to location and mood. But it's all very slow and not a little silly. Newman is too young, and Redford is too old. Admittedly, it *is* more fun the first time through, when the plot within a plot (Hooker is *not* betraying Gondorff) is still deftly hidden. After that first screening the stitches begin to show. And that's when it sinks in, the realization that we're cheering on a couple of cocky ne'er-do-wells who can't seem to manage an honest day's work.